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Christian Social Action

The Call of 'Oxford' 1937

THE Universal Christian Council for Life and Work met in Oxford in 1937 to survey the problems of *Church, Community and State*. It weighed the social life of Christian countries, and found it tragically wanting. It threatened civilisation's doom, because of its refusal of the authority of God.

This conclusion has the greater force because of the peculiar character of the Conference. It was composed of 400 men and women in positions of high responsibility, from many lands and many Churches. It was prepared for with exceptional thoroughness for some years. It was carried through in a setting of profound religious devotion. The result was a call to action which we here attempt to interpret for British Christians. A subsequent two-day Conference, jointly arranged by the British Christian Council and the (English) Christian Social Council, agreed upon the main outline of this call.

With impressive authority, 'Oxford' reiterated the notes of Crisis and Call already struck in the first pamphlet in this series, and gave more precise content to the Questions and Objectives there set out. In respect of Crisis, 'Oxford' said in its official Report (p. 67):

> *"The Christian Church is called upon to fulfil its mission to-day amidst a distraught and disunited mankind. Divisions and conflicts there have always been. But the foundations of communal life . . . have remained sufficiently firm to preserve the essential structure of the various communities in which men have lived their lives together. To-day, however, as probably only once or twice before in human history, the foundations themselves are shaken."*

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CAUSES OF CHAOS.

The cause of this chaos is traced to a practical disregard of the principles and standards for which Christianity properly stands. The world's thinkers and doers have founded their sciences and philosophies, their social institutions and objectives, on other lines than those which Christ declared to be according to the purpose of God. The Churches have acquiesed in this divorce of the world's practical life from their own proper standards.

By the careless pursuit of selfish ends, individuals and nations inflict unimaginable suffering on other people, as it were by accident. In the end, the resulting tensions and miseries lead to wars and persecutions. It is only then that we discover the depth and range of our habitual sin. For, all the time, our common life, and, especially in this country, our buying and selling, have been organised primarily for material success, and these pursuits inevitably override the interests of peace and justice. So, we have built up a social organism in which men are driven to do what they have no wish to do, and so produce results they positively hate. As ' Oxford ' says :

> " *The . . . whole framework of our lives seem to have gone so awry that calamity and moral havoc are constantly being wrought by the sum of the actions of ordinary well-meaning men* " (p. 203 : see also pp. 167, 196 and 238).*

Hence the call of ' Oxford ' to the Christians of this generation : a call to detect the features in our present social order which are inhumane and Godless, and oppose and repudiate them.

CALL TO THE CHURCH.

In times when the accepted customs and practices of the world are so far adrift from what is right, the only hope for man is that some truer principles of living will gain fresh hold upon the minds and consciences of the peoples. This is a service which Christianity has rendered to the nations in the past.

> " *The great question to-day is whether the Church can once again render this service to the world and evoke and educate a conscience which may help to save society from corruption and decay* " (p. 48).

That the world is in dire need of the guiding truth which God had enrusted to the Church, ' Oxford ' was convinced. At the same time there was full recognition of the present failure of the Church itself to realise its own distinctive message and embody it fully in its own life. In the words of the report :

* Page references here and elsewhere are to the Official Report of the Oxford Conference, "THE CHURCHES SURVEY THEIR TASK."

"The inertia and vagueness of the churches, and their remoteness from the common life, have often exhausted men's patience, so that they have turned from the way of Christ, . . . the shortcomings of historic Christianity are one cause of the disavowal by the modern age of its Christian faith" (p. 36).

The Church, having thus failed to permeate the world with its own message, the world has permeated the Church:

" The Church itself 'is deeply infected with the very ills from which humanity suffers.'" "So, the Church's recall of the world to the feet of Christ must be preceded by the recall of itself" (p. 69.). (See also pp. 32-3 and 198-9).

Nevertheless, a repentant Church has still the word of power for the world.

" We do not take up our task as bewildered citizens of our several nations, asking if anywhere there is a clue to our problems; we take it up as Christians, to whom is committed 'the word of reconciliation.'"

SIN IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE.

Precisely what features in the organisation of society deny the principles and flaunt the values for which Christianity stands? In religious terms we may say that society at present is organised to protect material interests rather than spiritual interets, to glorify man's strength and ability rather than God's goodness and grace. In consequence, we have a social organisation which, on the one hand, sins against the dignity and worth of the individual human person, whilst, on the other hand, it frustrates man's craving and capacity for friendly association with his fellows in social community.

The sin against personality is evident in the suffering and premature employment of young people; their compulsion to blind alley and stunting occupations; the insecurity of wage labour; the countless thousands of incomes insufficient for physical nourishment; the undeserved incidence of unemployment; the miserable inadequacy of old age pensions; the strained relationships common in industry and commerce; the hateful rivalry in peace and deadly strife in war, in which millions are unwillingly involved.

The sin against community is evident in the suffering and disorder of our depressed industrial areas; the accumulated problem of the slums; the desolate conditions of life in the new housing estates; and the artificial accentuation of social and race consciousness everywhere. Our social organisation despoils and oppresses individuals just because it disregards, and even negates, the true conception of human community.

CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION REQUIRED.

These issues call for action of many different types. Most of them require at the one extreme political changes, and at the other extreme the cleansing of our own souls from all complicity in the evil which we desire to attack. We begin, as religious men and women are bound to begin, in the citadel of our own souls, and the sphere of our own private action. Yet :

> *" The ameliorative influence exerted by conscientious Christians in places of responsibility should not create the expectation that, without changes in institutions and legal relationships, they will be able to overcome the evils here set forth "* (p. 122).
>
> *" Like every individual, each of the great corporate societies or ' orders ' of human life is always infected with the sins of pride, fear, idolatry, greed and insularity. They are always partly God-inspired, partly sin-infected, and therefore ' demonic ' in their claims "* (p. 218).
>
> *" It is clearly the duty of Christians, therefore, to test by the canons of their faith not merely their individual conduct and the quality of their private lives, but also the institutional framework of organised society. . . . They cannot either take the economic system for granted, or dismiss it as irrelevant to the life of the spirit "* (p. 118). Again : *" The unconditional supremacy of the State or nation, advanced either in times of peace or war, is incompatible with the Church's faith in Jesus Christ as its only Lord "* (p. 182).

Christian people have therefore to seek to change the whole social structure in so far as it thus entangles men and women in evil ways. The call is to something like revolution in its result. It is something entirely different from revolution in the process by which it is to be reached.

THE CLAIMS OF PERSONALITY.

Christians have thus to try to root out the evils in industrial and commercial practices which, ' Oxford ' declared, lead to the four following consequences :

i. The Enhancement of Acquisitiveness.
ii. Excessive Inequalities.
iii. Irresponsible Economic Power.
iv. Frustration of Vocation.

Most points in this indictment have been familiar to the Churches since the Copec Conference of 1924; but ' Oxford ' struck a distinctive note, when speaking of our present inequalities, from the social and spiritual point of view. The report says :

> *" The possibilities of amassing private accumulations of wealth should be so limited that the scale of social*

values is not perverted by the fear and the envy, the insolence and the servility which tend to accompany extreme inequality" (p. 116).

There is also a new emphasis on the false worship of material success in what was said of the last of these four evils.

> "*A profound conflict has arisen between the demand (on the one hand) that the Christian should be doing the will of God in his daily work, and (on the other) the actual kinds of work which Christians find themselves forced to do within the economic order*" (p. 108).
>
> "*But even more serious is the constant threat of unemployment. . . . This situation cannot be met by measures of unemployment assistance, because it is the lack of significant activity which tends to destroy a man's human self-respect*" (p. 109).

THE CLAIMS OF TRUE COMMUNITY.

Alike for his satisfaction and fulfilment, the individual needs to be in right relation with his fellows wherever he meets them and in all that he does. "One is your Master, and all ye are brethren." This is the test by which to judge the relations of neighbour and citizen in social life, of worker and manager in industrial and commercial life, of nation and race in political life. Does any industrial or political organisation make the individual member merely instrumental to its own purpose? Does any economic or political community lead its members to hate or despise the members of some other economic or political group? These are wrong kinds of community.

The wrong is exemplified in the perpetuation of national and racial antipathies, which even divide the Church of Christ, the accentuation of educational and social differences to the point of class separation and estrangement, the suppression of racial or religious minorities for reasons of state unity, or the disintegration of local communities for the sake of economic gain.

'Oxford' was concerned with all these relations, to all of which the same principles apply. It expressed itself most clearly, however, with regard to the relations of one race to another, thereby setting the standard for the proper relations between any one group and its members, and between any two groups. All these questions are to be approached on the principle:

> "*That all men are by birthright children of God created in His image; and, therefore, brothers and sisters to one another . . . and intended by God to be brought within the fellowship of His one true Church,*" and that "*the Word became flesh in One of a race that was then, as now, widely despised.*"

INDIVIDUAL ACTION.

Take, for example, the general failure to do justice to the claims of God and our neighbours in class relations, business organisation, or in money matters. These challenge our own inner attitudes to personal wealth and power, to the claims of others, to the demand of duty, to the accepted social divisions among us.

> *" Christians must come to understand how far they really do seek, in spite of all pretensions to the contrary, a world in which they and their group are on top, how far their opinions on economic issues are controlled by the interests of the group to which they belong "* (p. 121).

In such matters there is probably need for most of us to practise rigorous self-examination, to expect to find considerable contamination, and to impose upon ourselves some sharp discipline to ward off some forms of covetousness, snobbishness, slackness or Godlessness in these matters. The need is all the greater since

> *" This power of delicate discernment and sensibility is rare in the world, because it is, in truth, a God-given grace, and as such should be the peculiar contribution of the Church to the making of true community "* (p. 124).

Till these inner responses to the spirit of true community have been made, further action is both impertinent and impotent to forward the Kingdom of God on earth. But, once they are made, a constructive opportunity for individual action immediately opens. Inequalities can be diminished by sharing, social and racial gulfs can be bridged by friendship. In business, affronts can sometimes be prevented, opportunities can be more widely shared, and relationships can be made more personal and considerate at a hundred points.

The infinitesimal yet cumulative results of such action might change the whole social climate in a relatively short space of time, if it were widespread throughout the Church.

GROUP ACTION.

Individual sincerity being thus won, the way is open for more constructive action, by organised groups attempting to replace conditions in which personality and friendship are alike despised, by conditions in which friendship is achieved and personality honoured.

Combined Christian action will take a multitude of different forms, and for many purposes Christains will act with others in striving for better types of social life. But 'Oxford ' requires more than this. The secular trend of modern life affects not only society as it is, but also the generality of movements for social betterment, and it cannot be adequately met except by group action on an explicitly Christian basis, and for explicitly Christian ends. We therefore take for granted, but leave aside, the many excellent and necessary forms of Christian co-operation in general schemes for social improvement, and

concentrate upon two more specific types of Christian group action.

> *" There must be a multiplication of small living groups of men and women who come together to help one another in discovering and fulfilling their Christian responsibilities in the home, in the neighbourhood, in civic life, in the professions and in industry, in social service and in the political arena."*

(1) A first, though possibly not a common type, will be an attempt to create a **separate community** which embodies in a high degree the qualities of community which Christianity enjoins and begets. This can only be done by drawing together a limited number of persons into a closely organised community, animated by a common faith, and with its members bound to one another by an explicit Covenant involving economic and social obligations.

This is to be discussed more fully in C.S.A. Pamphlet No. 3.

(2) A second type of Christian group action is that of **Bridge-building,** in which a Christian group established on a specifically Christian basis (e.g., the Young People's Guild of a given Church) adopts some other group of persons from a depressed area, a neglected social class, a persecuted race or foreign nation, and tries not merely to alleviate their material lot, but to incorporate them into their own community as valued friends and partners.

> *"There is a call from God to-day, to all Christians, to a more passionate and costly concern for the outcast, the under-privileged, the persecuted, the despised in the community and beyond the community."*

The undoubted test of success in establishing social community is whether we have established new and permanent and costly friendships, on a footing of complete equality, with people from whom we had previously been separated by barriers of social position, business function, race or class.

(3) A third type is the **Christian Vocational Group,** of persons engaged in the same field of action, whether in business life or in social service. Concerning the need for such Groups, ' Oxford ' said :

> *" There is a call from God to-day : To Christian men and women in the same vocation or industry to meet together for prayerful discussion as to how in their particular sphere of the common life the problems which arise can be dealt with as God would require."*

The scope of two such types of group has been worked out by the Christian Social Council, viz. : Groups for the principals in manufacturing business, and Groups for subordinates in business generally : Groups of intermediate responsibility may find these suggestive also.

(4) A fourth type is for **Christian Study and Propaganda** on the great themes on which the conscience of Christian people is still inert, and the direction of attention to issues on which

the conscience of the Church is still unsure. The Christian duties set out in this pamphlet, for instance, need to be proclaimed, and action stimulated.

Such Groups will often be concerned with Christian political study but not for the purpose of party political propaganda. They are, rather, for the purpose of seeking the mind of Christ on those first principles of political action on which the mind of the Church is not yet clear.

SUSPENDED ACTION.

It is no good trying to mobilise Christian opinion on some of the big political issues connected with property or peace, for example, till Christian thought has grown clearer on these questions. Thus:

(1) **On the peace question,** 'Oxford' called the Church to study more deeply the nature of the entanglement of evil in the organised life of men, which causes war sometimes to appear as the only sufficient instrument for defending justice, and meantime to honour the conscientious differences of its members with regard to the means of establishing peace.

(2) **On the question of property,** the Conference challenged all who exercise, or benefit by, the property rights that are at present legal, to search their minds and consciences as to the justice of these rights.

> *"All property which represents social power stands in special need of moral scrutiny. . . . The question must always be asked whether this is the kind of power which can be brought under adequate social control"* (p. 118).

Groups working on these subjects should think of themselves as **missionary groups.** This is the true type of the study group, which, unless it springs from experience and leads to action, may be a bit of idle self-indulgence.

We commend the following **study material** for the follow-up of 'Oxford.':

"The Churches Survey their Task." (Allen & Unwin, 5s.).
"That They Go Forward," by Eric Fenn. (S.C.M., 2s.).
"Christian Community in the Modern World." (1s.).
"Youth Calls to Youth." (3d.).

The last two are preparatory to the International Youth Conference at Amsterdam, 1939, and are obtainable from the British Christian Council, 1, Arundel Street, London, W.C.2.

IN CONCLUSION.

These matters are difficult matters, but the Church is the only place where there is any hope of their being faced, so

> *"There is a call from God to-day to every local congregation to realise at any cost in its own self that unity, transcending all differences and barriers of class, social status, race, nation, which we believe the Holy Spirit can and will create in those who are ready to be led by Him."*